

Computer And Internet Uses Among Elderly Population: Adding Activity And Quality To Life

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Abstract

Activity theory suggests that except for the inevitable changes in biology and health, older people are the same as middle-aged people with essentially the same psychological and social needs. In this view, decreased social interaction that characterizes old age results from the withdrawal of society from the aging person. Our study suggests that a large percentage of older citizens are computer literate, use Internet on a regular basis and believe that lack of basic computer skills is a disadvantage. Various activities ranging from email and chat on the Internet to surfing the net for useful information are common. We conclude that computer uses among older population adds value to their life.

Introduction

For the past several decades, the older population in this country has been increasing significantly. Improved medical technology and standards of living have contributed largely to this trend. Due to scattered family, they are often left without a significant role in late adulthood. This confusing state of life and explicit devaluation may last for many years. Many are capable of doing most of the intellectual and physical activities in which they participated during their fifties (Caro, Scott, & Chen, 1993). In recent years, growing numbers of senior citizens in the United States have been purchasing computers and using the Internet. It is accepted that computer uses are an important part of normal life – both for children and adults. Our goal in this paper is to investigate if certain sector specific activities that are attributed to add quality to life are common among older population.

Research Objectives

In This Study We Investigate:

- if computer technology exerts significant influence on their lives
- if computer uses adds value to older people's day-to-day life

The problem of social and emotional isolation, which is adverse to health and quality of life, confronts many older people (Chappell & Badger, 1989; Dugan & Kivett, 1994; Krause, 1991; Mullins, Sheppard, & Andersson, 1991). Havighurst and colleagues (Havighurst, et.al, 1963; Havighurst, 1968) coined the expression activity theory to refer to a point of view with regard to optimum or successful aging. According to this view, except for the inevitable changes in biology and health, older people are the same as middle-aged people, with essentially the same psychological and social needs. In this view, decreased social interaction that characterizes old age results from the withdrawal of society from the aging person. This decrease in interaction proceeds against the desires of most aging men and women. The older person who ages optimally is the person who stays active and manages to resist the shrinkage of his/her social world. Hence, staying active adds quality the life of an elderly person and helps age successfully.

A set of activities will be surveyed among respondents and a positive response of 50% and above will reflect 'acceptable attitude'. Similarly a set of positive responses by 75% or more respondents for a list of activities and type of benefits received by seniors reflect significant influence on life. Finally positive responses (greater than 50%) in motivation for purchasing computers, selected nature of activities and perceived benefits result in concluding that computer uses add value to day-to-day life.

Methodology

The present research is an exploratory cross-sectional study. A survey research method is used in the study. The study will explore the nature and reasons why seniors purchase computers, whether the nature of activities and perceived benefits are predominant and if seniors have a realistic understanding of technology requirements at the job. We focus our survey on four broad categories:

- Motivation for purchasing a computer
 - this will support the notion that seniors have an acceptable attitude towards computer uses and learning
- Nature of activities performed on the computer
 - this will support the notion that when it comes to using computers in daily activity, seniors are just like any other adults.
 - this will support the notion that these activities will keep the seniors connected to the world around them and in turn exert significant influence on their lives
- Nature of benefits as a computer user
 - this will support the notion that the nature of benefits supports an active life style
- Perception if computer uses will improve job prospect
 - this will show if seniors are aware that some level of computing skills are expected of all workers at the present day and time.

The survey was conducted both one-on-one and by a group-administered process depending on the convenience of the respondent. The study was limited to people who were 60 and over, living in Warrensburg, a university-town in Johnson County, Missouri. Only those older people who used computers either in their home or workplace were included in the study. The sample for this study involved 100 older people. The subjects were identified through the snowball technique. A survey questionnaire was administered to elicit information from the respondents. Descriptive findings in four areas: motivation for purchasing computers, nature of activities performed on the computers, type of benefits drawn as a computer user and whether knowledge in computers would improve their job prospect. These are accumulated and converted in percentage. A correlation statistical test was used to test the relationship hypotheses of the present study.

Summary Of Descriptive Findings

A large majority of the respondents bought (80%) and owned (88%) computers themselves. A great majority taught themselves computer skills (81%) either by using books or trial and error methods, and half (51%) learned at workplaces. Seventy-one percent of the respondents learned computer skills at their homes, and 64% said that they acquired computer skills in schools and colleges. Here are some findings in selected categories:

Conclusions

The results of this study support the notion that the older people adapting successfully to the electronic age. They share a set of meanings, values, and commonalities including physical limitations, role change, and generational experiences that are distinctive to their own group. At the same time, they also try to maintain integrity and solidarity in their cyber-org society by following some rituals and ceremonies. All these factors contribute to enhance the quality of life of these seniors.

a. Motivation for purchasing computers:

Educational enrichment is the main motivation	77%
Sharing information and building networks	73%
Children and /or friends motivated to learn uses of computer	84%
'Human-machine relations are becoming a common way of life'	88%
Believe that lack of basic computer skills is a disadvantage	94%
Aware of availability computer training programs.	72%
Want to learn new technology	85%
Received favorable attitudes from people toward their computer learning	99%
Electronic age is pressuring elderly people to have computer literacy in order to adjust to their present lifestyle.	62%
Do not have any fear about using computers.	50%

b. Nature of activities performed on the computer:

On an average, use computers 1-3 hours a day	95%	
Use computers every day for personal correspondence	100%	
Use for researching travel and vacation information	86%	
There is sufficient travel related information on the web	95%	
There is adequate health services information on the internet	90%	
Internet use as an important tool of communication	91%	
Internet use opens a whole new world to them	86%	
Uses e-mail as a means of communication	97%	
Surf Internet to gather information on various matters	88%	
Stay connected to family and friends	89%	
Participated in electronic chat rooms and bulletin boards	62%	
Chat room discussions	Current issues	47%
	Politics	43%
	Social issues	41%
Contact others with similar interest	85%	
Access educational opportunities	71%	
Items bought on the internet	Gifts	73%
	Software programs	57%
	Books	38%

c. Nature of benefits as a computer user?

Computers provides various psychological benefits by engaging in various activities	81%
Opportunity to share experiences with like-minded people	78%
Opportunity for companionship	70%
Computers (internet) provide fast and inexpensive communication.	100%
Computing is a satisfactory learning experience	91%
Computers made lives better and easier	89%
Provided more independent living	82%
Developing a sense of attachment	50%
Members of these electronic gatherings take their relations off-line to meet people with whom they interact most frequently.	49%

d. Perception if computer uses improve job prospect?

Think that employers might say that elderly people are less able to work in a fast-paced computing environment	62%
Wished that every company would show an interest in hiring older people and utilizing their skills and expertise in computing.	82%
Thinking of taking up a part-time job.	41%

The findings of the study show that computer and Internet use is common among older people. This in turn supports the formation of the new phenomenon called electronic gatherings among older people. Majority of people in the sample purchased his/her computer to maintain active communications with the world. The present study indicates that a major portion of this population are participating in chatrooms and bulletin boards and forming electronic gatherings on the Internet. They discuss a wide variety of topics with other members of these groups. They try to maintain the integrity and solidarity that are needed for the proper functioning of a cyber-org society on the Internet by following some controlling mechanisms such as sending gifts and greetings. The nature and characteristics of these electronic gatherings resemble Durkhiem's theory of society. The formation of cyborg society among the older people was supported by the findings of the present study. These activities relieve older people from social and emotional isolation and add quality and value to their day-to-day life.

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